GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH OUR PRESIDENTS

By GEORGE H. PICARD

X.—Our Presidents as Society Men.

ALTHOUGH George Washington's boyhood was passed in an environment which was not calculated to make him familiar with the decidedly punctilious etiquette of the period, an opportunity to acquire society manners came to him before he had merged from his youth into full manhood.

Augustine Washington, the father of the first President, was not a man who would have been at his ease in a drawing-room, and his household was more accustomed to a profusion of the good things of life than to formality in making use of them. The elder Washington was conscious of his personal shortcomings in the matter of polite living and he resolved that at least one of the family should be initiated into the mysteries of polite society. With that end in view, he sent his eldest son by his first marriage to Oxford, as he well could afford to do. When Lawrence Washington returned to Virginia he had been transformed into the semblance of a man of the world, "a man of fashion and of wit," according to a chronicle of the time, "the boast of his father and the pride of the family."

Fortunate for Lawrence Washington that he was too much of a man to be spoiled by the adulation of his admiring family. Fortunate, also, for his social aspirations, developed by an extended residence at England's premier university, that the Fairfax family—the bachelor Lord Thomas and his married younger brother, Sir William—had come to the new world to take possession of the vast landed estate inherited from their maternal grandfather, Lord Culpeper. Lawrence Washington had met the Fairfaxes in England and at Belvoir, the stately mansion which Sir William reared in the Virginia wilderness, the handsome and talented young Oxonian was a welcome guest, eventually wedding the eldest daughter of the house and going with his fair and exceedingly fragile bride to live at Mount Vernon, the gift of his indulgent father.

It was at Belvoir and later at Mount Vernon that George Washington took his first lessons in deportment as it was understood in social world of his day. His abundant good looks and agreeable disposition captivated the Fairfaxes at first sight and they took him up with great enthusiasm and began to polish their diamond in the rough. Lord Fairfax took it on himself to instruct the youth in all the polite observances of his own set, and there is plenty of evidence that the future leader of his countrymen was an apt pupil. The leading men of the colony were entertained at Belvoir and at Mount Vernon, and eminent foreigners sat at the hospitable board in constant succession. Lord Fairfax made it a point to introduce his young friend to all the influential persons who visited him, and thus it happened that, before he attained his majority, George Washington had a speaking acquaintance with all the leading men in Virginia.

His marriage, too, was a distinct social uplift. The charming young widow who became his wife not only brought him wealth, but position as well. From the day when Mrs. Custis went to Mount Vernon as its mistress Washington's social position was supreme in the colony. Years afterward, when he was being discussed as the most logical candidate for leader in the strike for liberty, his manners and personal appearance were taken into the consideration. "There is no general on the face of the earth,"

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declared John Adams, who was determined to make the Virginian commander-in-chief of the American Army and would listen to no other suggestion, "who is his equal in looks and manners."

Never at his ease as a public speaker, Washington's manner, both at state functions and at social gatherings, was acknowledged by every one to be without blemish. During his residence in New York and Philadelphia as chief executive of the nation he had served so admirably, he fulfilled all the social requirements of his position with a grace and dignity that disarmed completely the criticism which any other American would have received at the hands of the ultra-exclusive, although untitled, aristocracy which dominated society in those cities. "The grand simplicity of this man who has not acquired it in foreign courts, but to whom it comes naturally by virtue of his nobility of soul, is always to be remembered," wrote Lafayette to Thomas Jefferson. "Were Louis Philippe half so fine a gentleman," said another distinguished Frenchman, some years afterward, "he might still be wearing a crown."

John Adams Not a Society Man.

John Adams had a profound distaste for what he regarded as the superfluities of polite society. He was blunt and to the point, and it made him irritable to the verge of rudeness to be compelled to do business with any one who was indirect in his methods. From the start he set himself resolutely against the diplomatic manner as he encountered it abroad, and, as a natural consequence, he was regarded as a boor at every court in which he made his appearance as American representative. His open disregard of official etiquette abroad was a sharp thodn in the flesh of his colleague, Benjamin Franklin, who was a model of deportment in his intercourse with foreign governments.

When, in the fall of 1777, Adams was appointed a delegate to France to co-operate with Franklin and Lee, who were then in Paris, in the effort to obtain help and money from the French government, some of his friends who were acquainted with his offhand manner shook their heads doubtfully. Fortunately for the blunt Massachusetts lawyer—and perhaps equally so for the country he served—the suave Dr. Franklin had concluded a treaty with France before the arrival of his plain-spoken fellow-delegate. At his first presentation at court, Adams made little effort to conceal his disapproval of the pomp with which Louis XVI. received him, and, as might have been expected, he became unpopular at once, while Franklin, with his courtesy, affability and tact in paying compliments, was greatly admired and lionized. That these two great Americans were somewhat critical of each other is apparent from letters sent to friends at home. "That he is a great genius, a great satirist, a great politician is certain," writes Adams of Franklin, "but that he a great statesman is more questionable." "Mr. Adams is always an honest man, often a wise one," writes the genial philosopher, "but he is sometimes completely out of his senses."

Mr. Adams's manners did not improve as he grew older. After his inauguration as President in Philadelphia and return home after the ceremony Washington, the retiring President, called on him, congratulated him cordially and wished him a happy, successful and honorable administration. The retiring executive found the new one in a most ungracious mood. Owing to the comparative unpopularity of his party and the great activity shown by the Anti-Federalists, headed by Jefferson, now Vice-President, Adams had been elected by a sleader majority, and he bore in mind the fact that Washington had not been an active participant in the recent campaign and had not used his great influence to further his successor's chances. It made Adams bitter and his state of mind was all too apparent in his manner.

Four years later, when he failed of re-election and Jefferson went in with a wild outburst of popular approval, John Adams permitted his disregard for the proprieties to make him ridiculous. He not only broke with his old friend and colleague openly, but would not remain in Washington to see him inaugurated. This most serious political quarrel to which the American public had been a spectator endured for thirteen years. Then the old-time friendship was resumed and continued to the end.

The Younger Adams Devoted to Etiquette.

As if to make amends for his sire's lack of good manners, John Quincy Adams was one of the most punctilious followers of the accepted code of professional and social ethics who ever occupied the White House. During his administration, there was no complaint, either in public or private circles, that social usage had been disregarded. Personally, he maintained th exterior manner of a Chesterfield, but he lacked personal magnetism and the warmth of expression with which he would have been irresistible. It was not that his sincerity was suspected, but his manner was invested with a formalism which repelled rather than attracted.

A striking instance of this absence of the fraternizing spirit followed Mr. Adams's election to the presidency. On the evening after the result had been made public, James Monroe, then at the close of his second term, held a presidential levee at the White House at which all diplomatic and social Washington was present, both Mr. Adams, the President-elect, and General Jackson, the defeated candidate, among the number. In this brilliant gathering it was interesting to study the respective personalities of the two men who had been pitted against each other in a remarkably stirring and decidedly vituperative national campaign. The Western planter, Indian fighter and soldier who had won the victory at New Orleans stood, genial and wreathed in smiles, the centre of a group of admiring friends. In a far corner stood the old diplomat and courtier, rigid as a statue and practically alone. A short time before that, the man who was receiving an ovation had been defeated in a struggle for one of the loftiest reaches of human ambition, and the silent and almost forsaken man had won. The personality of each of these great men was made as clear as a picture—the gallantry, the frankness, the camaraderie of the one, which captivated all within reach, and the frigidity, the self-concentration, the aloofness of the other, which repelled all advances.

During the evening these two men who were so far apart politically and socially happened to meet face to face, although they had no intention of the sort. Those in the immediate vicinity, seeing that a meeting was inevitable, stepped aside and waited breathlessly for the outcome. General Jackson, who had the exceedingly robust wife of a Tennessee Congressman on his arm, was first to realize the situation, and of the Declaration was master of all the social potency to which his studious nature and his association with the world's brightest minds entitled him. The charm of his manner contributed largely to his success as a promoter of American interests abroad and, his public life ended, continued to attract hosts of pilgrims to hospitable Monticello.

His intimate friends, Madison and Monroe—"the two Jameses," as they were called in Virginia—were as unlike as two men possibly could be. The former was bookish, shy, almost a recluse from a society viewpoint. Had the latter been shorn of his ability as a statesman he would still have remained a carpet knight of high degree, so pronounced was his social fitness. Even in his early manhood, when he was sent to France as a special commissioner for his government, James Monroe achieved a social conquest more positive than that of the irresistible Dr. Franklin. This preeminence as a society man was maintained throughout all his public career.

Andrew Jackson was the first President who was not a man of notable intelligence, marked culture and experienced statesmanship. His metamorphosis from the rude product of the Carolina wilderness into a great general and later into the most popular chief executive America has ever had, save Washington and Lincoln, is one of the most wonderful pages in the history of the nation. Although his ignorance hedged him in like a wall, high and impenetrable, he surmounted it and by the might of his personality managed to make a very respectable showing in the social world. Although he did not believe that the world was spherical, he was made an honorary member of the most exclusive geographical society in existence. At the time of his election to the presidency he had read only one book—"The Vicar of Wakefield"—from beginning to end, but he received the degree of doctor of laws from Harvard. Although his whole life had been an open defiance to the mandates of polite society, he was welcomed effusively by the most exclusive set in Washington when he went to the White House.

Van Buren a Man of Easy Manners.

Much of this amazing transformation was brought about by the cleverness of Martin Van Buren, Old Hickory's devoted friend and successor. Probably no other man in America had so much to do with the ejection of John Quincy Adams from the presidential chair and the seating therein of the hero of New Orleans. In doing this, he outwitted Adams, Clay, Webster and all the other politicians who were in opposition to the scheme. Van Buren was one of the most plant, politic and courteous of men. It was one of his fundamental principles never to give offense to any one and never to appear to notice an injury. His influence over General Jackson—who regarded him as the very beau ideal of a statesman—was unbounded. An adept in social forms, Van Buren, then Vice-President, took it on himself to prevent any conflict between General Jackson's native crudeness and the polite society of the capital, and he succeeded most admirably. In 1831 Daniel Webster wrote to a friend in regard to Van Buren's efforts to secure an entrance into society for a certain lady whom the President admired:

"Mr. Van Buren has evidently, at this moment, quite the lead in influence and importance. He controls all the pages on the back stairs and flatters what seems at present the Aaron's serpent among the President's desires—a settled purpose of making out the lady of whom so much has been said a person of reputation. It is odd enough, but too evident to be doubted, that the consequence of this dispute in the social and fashionable world is producing great political effects and may very probably determine who shall be successor to the present chief magistrate."

Webster's words were prophetic. Van Buren's efforts in this instance and in many others of a similar nature were so pleasing to General Jackson that at the next election he threw all the weight of his great influence in favor of the man who had smoothed his social pathway so acceptably.

Both the Harrissons were men of education and fair social equipment, although the younger was the possessor of a personality singularly free from warmth and spontaneity. John Tyler and James K. Polk were men of the world and quite at home in polite society. Zachary Taylor, unlettered and unpolished soldier that he was, knew as little of the demands of etiquette as he did of politics, and he admitted, at the time of his nomination, he had not voted for forty years. The frontier and small military posts had been his home, and he was ignorant for his rank and bigoted in his ignorance. Fed men have ever had a more undisguised contempt for rsocial usages than General Taylor, and he found the society game at Washington more trying to his nerves than all his battles with the Indians and Mexicans.

Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan were all in more or less harmonious accord with the accepted good form of their periods. The latter, especially, was notably punctilious in his observance of the laws of social requirement. He was a vigorous supporter of the measure regulating the dress of our ambassadors at foreign courts, prohibiting the military coat and small sword and chapeau which were required. He was a man of imposing personal appearance, with notable charm of manner, and during his administration the public festivities at the White House were conducted on a scale of great magnificence.

Lincoln a Diamond in the Rough.

It may be said of Abraham Lincoln that, although he bore not the faintest resemblance to the variety of the genus homo known popularly as the "society man," he was not thrown into panic by his sudden plunge into the social vortex at the national capital.

His was a personality so individual under all conditions that it stood out as forcefully at a fashionable gathering as it did at a political meeting in a prairie town. He never affected a disregard for the usages of polite society, but seemed inclined to adopt them as rapidly as he became familiar with them. He had no quarrel with stiquette, as had General Taylor, but he was too honest and too great to assume a gentility to which he had no claim.

At the time of his accession to the presidency, Andrew Johnson had freed himself from all the crudeness of his illiterate early life and had become a polished man of the world. Although General Grant was not brilliant socially, it was not from lack of early training and long association with those who were. His dislike of social forms was probably due to his disinclination to use small talk and to a shyness which the great soldier was never able to overcome. Both Hayes and Garfield were men of unusual culture and were society men in the best sense of the term. Chester A. Arthur and William McKinley knew how to make themselves agreeable under any conditions, although neither had a marked fondness for ultra-fashionable society.

Grover Cleveland was never a social luminary and made it his business to see as little of fashionable life as was consistent with his position. Quite at one with him—perhaps in that particular only—is Theodore Roosevelt, who is far less convincing in a dress suit than when he is garbed in the rough-and-ready attire of a rancher.

As for President Taft—perhaps he is more distinctively a society man than any American President since James Buchanan.